



A Summer Remembered

Story by Brian Irwin

Photos by Jeremiah Thompson

BOSTON'S TURTLE TAXI DOESN'T TYPICALLY PROVIDE SERVICE TO THE WHITE LEDGE Campground. It's a bit out of their range. But the dispatcher happened to be a patient of mine and sent a wary driver to my New Hampshire home. Jeremy and Chris were too drunk to drive and needed a ride back to their tent. I'd intentionally not offered my backyard or guestroom, as I knew the ruckus we'd raise over a campfire would wake my kids. As the taxi arrived, Jeremy took the bottle of scotch by its neck, braced his other hand on my shoulder for balance, and announced, "To Glacier."

After his toast, Jeremy pinned the bottle to his lips and emptied the remaining third into his mouth. His arm dropped as he shot me a glazed look. Then, as if clubbed in the head, he dropped from his standing position onto his face, out cold.

Jeremy was breathing as we brought him to the taxi, and survival seemed probable. So Chris and I poured him into the back seat, reassuring the skeptical driver that this lump of a man was going to be just fine, but that pulling over to let him vomit every once in a while was probably a good idea anyway.

I haven't seen or heard from Jeremy since. He was an awkward guy with terrible asthma and a peculiar sense of humor that he attributed to his upbringing in a strict Jewish home, and the influences of his eccentric parents, both math professors at the University of Illinois. He had untamed curly hair and a smooth face, which he bragged never required shaving. He usually wore old concert T-shirts—none more recent than REO Speedwagon's 1990 tour—and white sweatpants pulled up to his calves. He'd moved to Boston where he looked me up online and invited himself to my house, ignoring my hints about being too busy and having a newborn baby. I'd met him years before when we both were working in the bar and restaurant at Many Glacier Lodge in Montana's Glacier National Park.

We didn't have a lot in common, Jeremy and I. He was a collector of Phil Collins cassettes. I liked the Dave Matthews Band and Richard Shindell, a folk artist with the songwriting talent of Bob Dylan and the voice of Jim Croce. I enjoyed hiking. Jeremy liked rodeos but was afraid of horses. Despite the incompatibility, I trolled him up as a backpacking partner for my last overnight fishing trip of the summer in Glacier. A coworker of mine, while hiking alone in the park, had recently been consumed by three grizzlies. Through the Park's forensic work, the bears were located and killed. But still, I'd be camping and wanted company. Jeremy said he was up for the trip if he could only find some shoes.

There was a strict dress code for waiters working in the lodge dining room. Black shoes. Tie. Slacks. I never saw Jeremy wearing any other footwear that entire summer. He lived in his lodge shoes, which he often wore with sweatpants, a fashion offense to which he was oblivious. Hours before our departure, he borrowed a pair of bright white Velcro shoes from one of the cooks. Available only by prescription, the shoes were exceptionally padded and extra wide to prevent toe ulcers. They were size eleven. Jeremy wore a nine. The trip was saved.

We arrived at Avalanche Lake early in the afternoon. I'd read it held a healthy, native, naive population of Western Slope cutthroat, just what my damaged ego needed after two fruitless days of fishing on nearby Otokomi Lake. Otokomi's fish were abundant and huge. Most over eighteen inches, they efficiently sucked hatching flies off the water's surface, but did not fall for poorly tied patterns like those I winged at them. I had left empty-handed.

Avalanche Lake was a brilliant sapphire, contrasting the giant hemlocks along its shore. It sat at the end of a valley in a bowl-shaped mountain pocket that had been symmetrically scooped out by a glacier, now long gone. We camped on the western shore, a few minutes from the water's edge. Setting up the tent, I grew concerned with fresh gashes in the nearby trees, consistent with damage from razor-sharp bear claws. One tree had been worn smooth on one side, its bark missing. This finding was consistent with a bear's rub from back scratching. There were Grizz in the area.

Trees lining the lake made backcasting difficult from anywhere other than some logs that had stacked up at the outlet. I waded among the waterlogged timbers, peeled out a handful of bright

yellow line, teetered on the logs, and managed to cast an Adams onto the glassy surface. It quickly vanished in a turbulent swirl, and my rod flexed. Gentle twitching transmitted to my hand as I easily retrieved my line. I netted a six-inch cutty with ruby red gills and the prominent crimson throat for which it is named. I slipped it back into the water and made another cast. Again, the fly was sucked under the surface. I landed and released another cutthroat, same size, same vibrant colors. The bountiful pond continued to yield fish with almost every cast. Jeremy even took the rod for a few throws and came up with fish. We finally quit and settled back into camp. The stove whispered as it cooked our noodles; and we sat in silence, sipping whiskey. As the sun dipped behind the sharp ridge above camp, it cast a sheet of light into the sky, outlining the contour of the rocky arête.

My family visited Glacier when I was a teenager. My father and I caught a few cutthroat the first day of that trip, and I immediately became obsessed with the idea of living and working in that environment. I didn't have the chance until the summer after my first year of medical school. I drove from Pennsylvania, and showed up alone, dirty, and poorly prepared. I asked for a job waiting tables at Many Glacier Lodge, the grandest in the park. I got it.

The hundred-year-old Many Glacier has a huge open lobby, five stories high. Lodgepole pines tower over the enormous, centrally located fireplace. Giant beams span the ceiling, inducing vertigo if viewed from below. The area around the lodge was frequented by grizzlies as well as black bears. It wasn't uncommon to have the hotel manager drop into the pub or restaurant and warn employees that a grizz had parked itself on the steps of the employee housing cabin, blocking entry. We all hiked with pepper spray, screaming "Whoa bear!" as we walked in the woods. No one hiked alone, except for one bizarre waiter named Ned, who'd landed at Glacier after losing his life savings on the unsuccessful launch of a revolutionary new spatula he thought would reform the food service industry.

But fishing was another story. I preferred to fish alone, especially when fishing the reliable evening hatch on Swiftcurrent Lake. I also fished alone when I was upset or pensive. I still do. It's a habit I took on as a child. My father taught me to flyfish on a gentle Maryland stream when I was in second grade. Those annual three-day fishing trips are among my most treasured experiences. I tediously prepared my tackle so that it precisely matched my father's. My line clippers had to be on the same pocket of my fishing vest as his. My dry flies, streamers, and leaders had to be distributed into the same types of fly boxes and vest pockets as his. Even my vest itself had to match his: a homemade garment sewed by my mother out of my father's retired army shirts. He was issued two shirts during his service. From these, my mother crafted two vests. I always wanted to fish right next to my father, so he could compliment my casting and be proud of me. But eventually I waded upstream, out of sight, and casted alone. For the rest of my life, that's how I'd fish.

Each night, just before sunset, Swiftcurrent boiled with rising brook trout, rarely more than eight inches long. The fish were plentiful but lacked any selectivity, making it the ideal place to not only falsely inflate my fishing ego but also provide escape from the hectic, loud, and unpleasant atmosphere of Philadelphia and medical school, where I'd return in the fall. Each night as I fished the lake, I grew more sad about leaving Montana.

I hated Philadelphia. Other than a few parks, which seemed too tidy and contrived, there wasn't any escape. Once, the police shut



down my road because a neighborhood kid unearthed a fractured human skull in his backyard. A week later someone discovered a dead body in the Taco Bell dumpster. I was feeling stressed from school, the academic pressure, and the sadness of seeing people pass away for the first time in my life. I tried to find solace by fishing local waters, but the result was disappointing.

The first time I tried the urban waters of Wissahickon Creek, a stabbing victim stumbled out of the bushes crying for help. The second time, I tore my waders on a rusty, submerged bike, and I foul-hooked a dirty diaper from the streambed. I caught no fish.

The fish of Montana's clean waters were as bright and healthy as Philly's were thin and full of toxins. And although some of the alpine tarns held only growth-stunted trout, not all the fish around Many Glacier were miniature.

Minutes east of the lodge sat the border of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and the town of Browning, one of the roughest settlements I'd seen since leaving Philly. Substance abuse and violence were common themes there. Except for the local fishing-guide services, most businesses in town were struggling, and had been for a long time. I found it ironic that here, in the still ponds of the Rockies' eastern slope, huge native trout thrived, growing fat and long,

while just down the street, the native people often struggled to buy food for themselves or their children. I was growing depressed that my summer was slipping away and I was being slowly reeled back East. Pulling a few trout from the still ponds of the plains would surely cheer me up.

The largest lake outside Browning sits in a depression. I'd been warned by a guy at the local fly shop that steep banks drop to the water's edge, making casting difficult from shore. The man in the shop wore a black shirt sporting an airbrushed wolf. His hair was jet black, shiny, and pulled taut into a ponytail. He generously lent me a float tube, which I dragged down to the lake's shore before climbing in and paddling my way to the middle of the lake.

At the far end rose the snowcapped peaks of Glacier National Park, turning to amber as the sun set. And just as the friendly shopkeeper promised, a caddis hatch exploded from the surface. I'd never fished from a float tube before. The unsteady gyration made casting awkward, but the tube expanded my artillery, which previously consisted of an average cast and a limited selection of flies. Buoyant, surrounded by a big sky above and water all around, I could suddenly stalk ravenous trout while experiencing a unique sense of isolation and independence.



I made a few false casts before dropping my line and caddis pattern into the fading rings on the water's surface. One slow retrieve and the fly vanished, the tail of a good-sized brown slapping the water as line uncoiled from the pile in my lap. I tightened the line with my fingers, then raised my arm to start what I thought would be a battle. Then I felt a pop as a long length of line floated on the water, straight as a needle, pointing directly into the setting sun.

My next few casts drew hungry fish to the surface, and after a few hours and a few misses, I'd landed and released a half-dozen plump champagne-colored browns. Their hooked jaws and sharp teeth shredded my fly into an ugly collection of broken feathers and thread.

At summer's end, I left Glacier, alone in the same dusty Honda Civic in which I'd arrived. As I drove down the valley, I stopped to have a last look at the turquoise lake and the wedge-shaped mountains that formed the backdrop, and the now almost-extinct band of ice that is Grinnell Glacier, clinging to the cliff behind it. I gazed at the hillside behind my cabin where my friends had held a bonfire and good-bye party for me the night before. The charred remains of the fire stood out like a black scar on the green hillside. Around the fire pit circled a cinnamon-colored grizzly and two bear cubs.

I was embarking on scenic, circuitous, five-day drive back to the urban jungle of Philadelphia, my inner monologue playing back memories of a rich summer, eclectic friends, and rising fish. I slept in my car every night—sometimes at carwashes, sometimes at trailheads—after long days of driving and fishing. By trip's end, I'd waded and angled the Snake, the Yellowstone, the Blackfoot, and many more great waters of the American West, pulling out and putting back more trout than I have caught in the eight cumulative years since.

The first night after I left Many Glacier, I drove until 3 a.m. Fueled by loud music and iced tea, I sped down the road that paralleled the Gallatin River, the trees poorly illuminated by a single headlight. The other one had been disabled by a wiring problem caused when I accidentally hit a fat marmot that sprinted in front of my car.

I pulled off the highway onto an unmarked dirt road that leads toward the Gallatin. As I rounded the corner, my headlight revealed a concrete slab in a clearing on top of which sat an orange helicopter rigged with a giant bucket, the type used to dump water on forest fires. I parked off the slab, the blades of the chopper looming over my vehicle. I turned off my engine and allowed my pupils to stretch themselves open to welcome the light of a rising full moon and countless stars. There was bear scat on the road adjacent to the helipad.





A short distance away was the edge of one of the finest trout river in North America. I knew tomorrow I'd fish it and was excited, but exhausted. I hadn't talked to another human in days and was dreading the fall, when medical school would resume. I splashed crisp water on my face and sat down on a boulder at a sharp bend in the river. In the belly of the meander, the water flattened out. Its surface reflecting the creamy glow of the moon. On top of the pool's water, subtle rings silently opened, each one releasing a hatching insect into the night sky. With an energetic thrash, a fish tore through the surface film, leaving behind a few bubbles and ripples that radiated out and vanished, releasing the water to once again reflect the brilliant light of the moon.

I watched the feeding pods of fish slurp insects as the dark water of the Gallatin slid by. I thought of the fast approaching morning when I'd drive out of Montana. Wondering if I'd ever return or if this wild place could someday be my home, my mind heard the rich voice of Richard Shindell, singing the story of a Mexican immigrant on the brink of deportation.

"Senor, as you know I was a fisherman. How full the nets came in. We hauled them up by hand. But when we fled, we left them out by the coral reef. They're waiting there for me. Running deep."